Bearing Witness as It Relates to Zen Practice

Sensei Rose Mary asked me to say a few words on bearing witness and street retreats as they relate to Zen practice. I work close to the Martin Luther King Jr. Library in downtown D.C., where many people who are homeless gather to rest, hang out, or use the library and restrooms. I walk by them every day and too often don’t look, don’t want to look. What do we not see? What do we ignore, reject? What aspects of suffering do we not want to let in? We turn away from our own suffering and thus from the suffering of others.

To quote the beloved Zen poem *Faith in Mind*, which we explored a little at the Labor Day retreat, “Indeed, it is due to our choosing to accept or reject that we do not see the true nature of things.” When we reject, we deny our wholeness, our interdependence, and remain attached to the illusion of a separate self. We shut down the doors of the heart, the doors to our common humanity.

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To help us to see, to bear witness, Roshi Bernie Glassman, cofounder of the Zen Peacemaker Order, began the practice of going on street retreats, a practice which has ancient roots. Shakyamuni Buddha and his monks begged for food every day. To quote Glassman about the retreats, “When we go to bear witness to life on the streets, we’re offering ourselves. Not blankets, not food, not clothes, just ourselves.”

I’d like to say a few words about the similarities between seated meditation and street retreats. Dogen says: “To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things. To be enlightened by all things is to remove the barriers between one’s self and others.”
To bear witness is to offer ourselves, to forget ourselves, to be enlightened by all things, dissolving the illusory boundaries. It is to see the true nature of things.

When doing zazen, we bear witness to all things that arise. We don’t reject anything. We give ourselves up to a greater awareness. When bearing witness—and there are many ways to bear witness—whether on a street retreat, in a hospice, or listening deeply to a friend or stranger—we take that backward step into a place of unknowing, of Oneness, and begin to heal ourselves and others.

We empty ourselves in seated meditation and we empty ourselves by going out on the streets—-we take almost nothing with us. The more we empty ourselves, the fuller our lives become. Whether on the cushion or off, we see that we have everything we need. On the streets we find abundance. Whatever we need is right here. We learn where our true wealth lies. Street retreats simply move sesshin into the streets.

Both zazen and street retreats are forms of peacemaking. They are opportunities for spaciousness. Sensei Rose Mary writes in the conclusion of her book Discernment: A Path to Spiritual Awakening: “For me, spaciousness of living has been the most important thing.”

Glassman discusses the three tenets of the Zen Peacemaker Order in his book Bearing Witness. These sum up the heart of Zen practice:

1. Penetrating the unknown by letting go of fixed ideas;
2. Bearing witness to joy and suffering; and
3. Healing ourselves and others.

To penetrate the Unknown (the first tenet), we drop concepts, stories, judgments, become groundless and radically accept absolutely everything. In that state of not knowing, we bear witness (the second tenet), that deep listening to our Oneness,
our nonseparation. To quote Glassman again, “Not only does Oneness begin with listening, listening begins with Oneness. Listen! Attention! Bear Witness!”

Peter Grosz, who went on a retreat to Auschwitz with Glassman, says: “You can have seen what you’ve seen and never be a witness. You can see the whole world and never have witnessed anything. Only when what you see becomes significant to someone—to yourself—for instance—do you become a witness.”

We chant The Identity of Relative and Absolute: “If you do not see the Way, you do not see it even as you walk on it. When you walk the Way, it is not near, it is not far.” What is this Way? What is the way of the streets?

When we bear witness, we bear witness to aspects of ourselves that are hidden or painful. We let ourselves be touched by all the sorrows and joys of the universe. And we see that this “me” is everyone and everything. When we chant the Gatha of Repentence, we say, “All evil karma ever created by me since of old . . . ” That “me” is everyone and everything throughout space and time.

That “me” is the cursing, wild-eyed man sprawled over a grate near a downtown library, is the older woman who doesn’t meet his gaze as she hurries to work worrying about a deadline, is the young window cleaner who pauses as he cleans the second-floor library windows to watch with affection as a elderly man below him packs his few possessions with great care. That’s the “me,” the One Heart.

We bear witness to our Oneness. When the barriers come down, compassionate action—healing ourselves and others (the third tenet)—can arise.

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Relevant here is the enlightened life of the great Japanese Zen Master Daito Kokushi, who lived thirty-five years after Dogen and greatly influenced the heart of the Renzai tradition. He received dharma transmission at the age of twenty-six. His teacher wrote on his transmission documents: “Before making this sanction public, you must continue your spiritual cultivation for twenty years.” In other words, you must not let anyone know about it. Zen legend has it that he chose to
live with the beggars under the Gojo Bridge in Koyoto, wearing a coat of straw and enduring hunger and cold and fleas and lice. He was an accomplished poet and calligrapher, but he chose to live as a beggar under that avenue bridge. After twenty years, he founded a great temple and began the capping verse tradition in koan study. Daito–Great Lamp or Light--didn’t turn away from suffering, the doors of his heart were open. There were no barriers between himself and others. He was completely alive to the interpenetration, the emptiness of all things. He wrote this poem:

*When one sits in meditation,*
  *one sees the people*
  *coming and going*
  *over the avenue bridge*
  *as trees growing deep in the mountains.*

I would like to end with a poem by the eighteenth-century Japanese poet/monk Ryokan, who sustained himself by begging. He wrote:

*Fleas, lice*
  *Any autumn bug that*
  *Wants to sing –*
  *The breast of my robe*
  *Is as good as any concert hall.*

Ryokan was known for taking lice out of the breast of his robe, sunning them on a piece of paper near his mountain hut, then carefully replacing them in his robe. He bears witness to our Oneness with all things, lives in harmony with all things, loves even lice, and reminds us of our responsibility to take great care.

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Susan Efird